Chapter One

From the African Continent and Back Again

By the Rev. Dr. Charles Leonard

I intend to share some of the movements that helped to promote Black awareness and establish a stronger Black presence in the Lutheran Church. The works of Dr. Jeff Johnson, *Black Christians: The Untold Lutheran Story* and Dr. Richard Stewart's, "The Black and Lutheran Project" are relied upon as references. Various figures are mentioned along with the struggle of Black people to carve out their place in a predominantly White denomination.

FROM ITS BEGINNING

Black people were imported by colonists to America as early as 1620, and the first African Slaves were brought to Jamestown in 1638. From the beginning of Lutheran presence in America, African people were present as a result of the slave trade. By 1678, Black people were an evident part of the Church in the nation's South and in the Caribbean due to colonization. The Danes on the Virgin Islands were catechizing Blacks. The Danish Church was intentional in its mission to educate and minister to African slaves on the Islands. A few such congregations there today have a deep history.

It is no secret that the slave trade was a lucrative "system" for the agricultural economy in America's southern states. Although slavery was strong in the South, accounts exist of Free Black presence in the North.

As slavery was abolished, it left the economy of the South in a shambles. The Church was also in disarray as it struggled with the "Black crisis." Among prevailing church questions were: What should we do with Black Lutherans? Do we integrate them into existing Lutheran congregations, or do we separate from them and encourage them to establish their own congregations? The latter course became the "rule of thumb" for many and the Lutheran Church had to find a way to make it happen.

IN THE NORTH

Synods began to discern that Blacks would need resources in order to segregate them from the White congregations. Blacks would need more formal education, leadership development and financial assistance.

Although the church was concerned about its mission overseas on the African continent it was attempting to solve challenges involving Blacks in America. Efforts were made in the 1700s and early 1800s to send a Black missionary to Africa, i.e., Liberia. That materialized in 1845 when Lutheran Synods trained and recruited Pastor Boston Drayton to serve in Liberia. Dr. John Bachman was instrumental in making this happen. Boston was a son of St, John's Lutheran church in Charleston, SC. A few pastors were recruited to be involved with the recruitment and training of Black men to become pastors for Black people.

Although some Blacks were recruited, their training appeared to be inferior and inadequate for leading a congregation. The few recruited needed more theological education to go forward. Efforts at improved training were made by the General Synod, and some of these men were encouraged to establish their own congregations for Black Lutherans, but resources were inadequate for these churches to survive.

One small group wanted to establish their own Synod particularly for Black congregations. The General Synod blessed this move and. However, no resources existed for salaries or maintaining congregations. Known as the Alpha Synod, it was probably one of the first attempts to encourage Black people in the church to build a sense of pride and awareness of Black presence in the church.

Dr. Johnson's research takes a strong position that the Alpha Synod did not come out of a protest movement as was the case for the African Methodist Episcopal Church, but rather resulted from a need to preserve Black Lutheranism. It united old and new Black Lutherans in North Carolina.

In the 1920s much attention focused on the education of Black people, especially in the South. A young Black woman, Rosa Young, had a passion for education. She was a Methodist and started a school for Black children in Wilcox County, Alabama. She had been educated in Alabama and developed a passion to educate Black Lutherans in rural Alabama.

Young saw public schools as highly inferior and felt that improvements needed to be made. She had opened a number of schools across the County and appeared to be somewhat successful until the town government began to give her difficulty and worked to impose financial burdens that made it almost impossible to maintain her work without help. She reached out to the Lutheran Synodical Conference to request financial assistance. The synods came to investigate her work and became convinced that it would be a good mission for the church to become involved. The synods convinced her to let them help her manage the schools with her taking on a major role in their operation. Some pastors were also assigned to teach in her schools. This extremely important move lifted up education among Black people as a priority for the whole Church.

Around the late 1920s 29 Black Lutheran congregations were in Alabama's Wilcox County, according to reports:

> "By 1927 there were 29 Black Lutheran congregations and preaching points in the area and 27 day schools. During this period Wilcox County was the fastest growing area of Lutheranism in the United States. Young believed education was the future for her community and resolved to do something about the lack of good schools that were taught in the Churches. Most of them were dilapidated and so exposed to the elements that one might as well teach outdoors. Through her determination she organized dozens of schools.
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> The schools and congregations, however, needed teachers and leaders. Young personally inspired a number of those around her to take leadership roles in the growing ministry. To provide more teachers and leaders, Alabama Lutheran Academy was founded in Selma in 1922, with a high school and teacher training ("normal") school. The Academy eventually expanded to become Alabama Lutheran Academy and College, the first Lutheran institution of higher education to be staffed by African Americans.
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> The "Great Migration" of African Americans from the South during the 1920s and '30s weakened a number of these congregations and schools, but the Lutheran

presence among those of African descent in Alabama continued, in a great part due to the efforts of Young……"[1]

A Time of Storm -- 1830 Through 1960

During this era, the Lutheran Church had gone through much struggle and turmoil attempting to survive. Many of the European Lutheran Church organizations which exercised control over much of the Churches in the Caribbean, as well as the Guianas, had begun pulling back from sending missionaries and financial support. They were finding it difficult to send missionaries to these colonized areas of the world. We must give a show of thanks to the Moravian Church which went into the more challenging areas throughout the Caribbean to serve the Black populations in the interior.

At the same time in the United States the Lutheran Church was struggling to find ways to create sustainable ministry. Challenges existed in the North and the South, however Black Lutherans were found in more critical mass in the lower southern states, especially in the South Carolina Synod. That synod included Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina. In South Carolina there was a significant attempt at urban ministry.

> "Urban strategy conducted at St. John's (Charleston) progressed so well that the president of the South Carolina Synod, the Rev. Stephen A. Mealy, at the 1837 meeting of the Ministerium, held it up as a model to be emulated elsewhere.
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> In the Lutheran congregation in Charleston the instruction of the colored people long since received the attention which its importance demands, and perhaps in no other congregation in our country do the colored members possess greater advantages for obtaining the essential elements of religious knowledge." [2]

[1] Mark Granquist (https://www.Living Lutheran.org/author/mark-granquist/)

[2] Jeff Johnson, Black Christians; The Untold Lutheran Story, Concordia Publishing House, St . Louis(1991) p118

Saint John's Lutheran Church, Charleston, South Carolina

It was in this congregation that Black people were recruited and allowed to join the congregation, but under strict regulations. The congregation voted that Black people could be catechized, but with permission of their slave owners. It was the case that St. John's was an exception. Most congregations were slow in working with Blacks until around 1840. It is remarkable that 40 Black people were baptized in St. John's in 1830 and 44 in 1835. It can be said that at the same time only 19 Black people were baptized in the remainder of the Synod.

The Black people of St. John's Church maintained a vision to one day sending a Black American missionary to Africa. They made two attempts to meet this goal and eventually succeeded with young Jehu Jones. He was a Black tailor who was a member of the congregation. Jones was recruited and ordained by the Lutheran Ministerium of New York. He would be the first Black ordained as a Lutheran pastor in the United States. He ran into problems trying to get back to Charleston and had to return to New York. He tried to enroll at the American Board of Missions and was rejected. Returning to the Lutheran Ministerium of New York for assistance, he received no help.

The next attempt was to approach Daniel Alexander Payne as a possible candidate for missionary to Liberia, Africa. He was not a Lutheran, but rather a Methodist from birth. However, the Ministerium and the Black people of St. John saw promise in him. He was a teacher at heart and though ordained by Lutherans he never wanted to be a minister nor a Lutheran. He had a passion for the education of his people, and he eventually opened a school for Black people. It was successful, however, local authorities enforced a new law making it unlawful for Black people to operate or teach in their own schools. It was at this point that Payne was encouraged to enroll in Gettysburg Seminary.

Payne was ordained by the Frankean Lutheran Synod, a small Lutheran group of congregations in New York. They had hopes of his going to the West Indies as a Lutheran missionary. However, he became Ill and never took the call. He eventually joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church and went on to become a renowned bishop in that church body.

The Black people of St. John made a third attempt and were successful this time as they approached a member of the congregation, Boston J. Drayton. The South Carolina Synod gave permission for him to go to Africa as a missionary and issued him credentials for this call. It is remarkable that this idea of sending a missionary was the sole vision of the Black

members of St. John's Church. It is said that the Pastor of the congregation demonstrated no passion for this project but did not oppose it. Drayton left Charleston in November 1845 sailing to the colony of Maryland, just southeast of Liberia. Upon his arrival he wrote back to the people to say:

> "I have been blessed to find a field of labor not in competition with others, that The Lord has reserved for us. The governor has told me that I can have as much land as I want to build on in the name of the Lutheran Church of America. I will begin school.... I will build it large enough that it may be used as a church, we shall call it Lutheran Missionary School."[3]

As we can see the Lutheran Church and Blacks had a difficult time and troubling relationship through the years. Jeff Johnson's text "Black Christians: The Untold Lutheran Story" describes that relationship and sheds light on the Black Lutheran story for almost three and a half centuries, but what has happened to the Black people in the Lutheran church since mid-20th Century?

THE BLACK LUTHERAN EXPERIENCE 1960 -2020

From the time of colonization and the great migration to the United States, Blacks have been present in the Lutheran journey. The 1900s saw many developments in the Lutheran Church in America. A number of ministries targeted urban areas, and many Black people were migrating from the rural South to Northern cities for improved quality of life. The draw of better employment opportunities in factories, companies, possibilities regarding housing all appealed.

[3] Ibid, P121

As Black Lutherans moved North, they found it difficult to simply join a Lutheran Church due to the residual reality of segregation among white Lutherans in the cities. Although there was no warm welcome for some Black people, they did try remaining Lutheran.

As more Black people migrated to urban areas Whites began to move away from some of those areas, seeking more suburban and small-town residences. As urban neighborhoods desegregated, white flight increased. Many congregations of the North found themselves with a growing population of Black people and eventually Spanish- speaking people. These changes challenged the Lutheran Church. "Integration" and "Inclusiveness" became buzz words around the Lutheran Church and the three (3) major Lutheran Bodies in America began to tackle this problem.

> "The 'Great Debates,' begun in the early 1930's, only seemed to come to an end when the three largest Lutheran bodies drew up significant policy decisions against the backdrop of major upheavals within American society as well as changes within these denominations themselves. In 1947, the Missouri Synod formally decided to begin the process of integrating Black pastors and their congregations into the various geographical districts. The American Lutheran Church pulled out of a cooperation effort of the national Lutheran Council and adopted another form of integration following the 1954 Supreme Court Brown vs. Board of Education decision. The Lutheran Church in America adopted a policy of inclusiveness at almost precisely the same moment that the United States Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act".[4]

The First Black Lutheran Caucus

It must be acknowledged that the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod did major work among their congregations to enhance ministry among Black peoples of their church body. They chose to go with a policy of "integration" which resulted in many problems among their leadership surrounding ministry to Black people.

Between 1940 and 1962 the United Lutheran Church in America sought a policy of inclusiveness and collaborated with the American Lutheran Church Board for Colored Missions and the National Lutheran Council surrounding ministry for Blacks and their congregations. This collaboration was not easy and eventually was abandoned due to indecisiveness about goals for Black ministry. In 1962 the United Lutheran Church merged

[4] Ibid, 198

with other smaller church bodies to form the LCA (Lutheran Church in America). Its first President, Dr. Franklin Clark Fry had the vision of the Church becoming more related to the American society and the challenges of the times. Civil rights were a hot issue of the day.

At the 1964 Biennial Convention the LCA began to zero in on minority affairs. It issued is first Social Statement on Race Relations and ordered by vote of the Assembly that all Units of the Church work to dismantle segregation and racism in its practices.

In 1968 the LCA took another major step to demonstrate its commitment to dismantling segregation:

> "The direction of the LCA was signaled by two events. In 1968, when Dr. King's father addressed the LCA Convention, he was given $50,000 for the Civil Rights Movement. Following the issuance of the Black Manifesto (drawn up by the National Economic Development Conference 1969), the LCA asked its Churchwide Agencies to consider the formation of a financial program for minority group development. At the same time, a revolving fund of $130,000 was established which, in addition to church agency loan/grants, was to go for projects in the Black community."[5]

These events set the path for the growth in Black ministry and leadership. Funds became available for leadership training and many Black leaders were recruited to do ministry among Blacks in the LCA.

As a result of the LCA's commitment to inclusiveness, the Rev, Craig Lewis, pastor of Lutheran Church of the Resurrection, Queens, New York, was called as Associate Director for Theological Education with the Division for Professional Leadership in the LCA. Part of his portfolio was to recruit more Black leadership for the Church. In this position he commented:

> "The LCA Is not producing enough professional minority leaders. I believe that my greatest challenge is to be able and willing to speak the truth while representing some things in the LCA that aren't going that well..... I am interested in the spiritual growth of people, that their ears may be open to a call which may come. I am also concerned in career counselling to let people know that the option of ministry is open."[6]

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[5] Ibid , 215

[6] TieLine, Association of Black Lutherans, Division for Mission in North America, LCA, Spring 1981 edition

Pastor Lewis was eventually joined by Grover C. Wright, former Pullman Train Porter who was recruited to become a Parish Worker for one of the Lutheran Congregations in Philadelphia. This important development celebrated Mr. Wright's special gift for recruiting leaders for the church. He was called by the Division for Professional Leadership, which had been given responsibility of identifying and equipping minority persons, clergy and lay, for mission and ministry of the church in the USA as well as globally.

Grover Wright was highly effective in his effort to recruit Black leadership. He traveled the nation's colleges, universities, seminaries, and other professional schools to recruit leadership for the LCA. He recruited many potential pastors from professional schools and businesses who never realized before meeting him that they had a call to ministry. He had the gift of discernment and was persistent when he recognized potential leaders for the church.

While doing his work of recruitment, Mr. Wright also took on responsibility to help organize the Association of Black Lutherans (ABL). He traveled to many parts of the U.S. to help the association organize Regional Groups whose boundaries were defined by synodical/regional lines. There were four regions: Eastern, Southern, Mid-Western, and Western. These Regions developed Chapters of the Association where high concentrations of Black congregations and peoples were located.

ABL's goals were to:

Encourage maximum participation of Black persons in the ongoing program of the church

Raise the consciousness level of Blacks regarding their cultural and social heritage, emphasizing those factors which have been strengths for the Black community throughout the years

Assist the LCA, Synods, agencies, institutions, and congregations in better understanding Black culture and incorporating those practices which will enhance the church and make it more reflective of its membership

Assist the LCA in implementing "Goals & Plans for Minority Ministry Adopted at the LCA Convention, July 1978 in Chicago. Illinois

Actively recruit and support Black youth and adults for Church vocations

> Advocate for unrestricted mobility for Black leadership (clergy & lay), opening up positions in institutions, congregations, synods, and Churchwide Agencies
>
> Focus theological education to include urban concerns and black culture[7]

In order to demonstrate its commitment to promoting ministry among Black people and the eradication of racism in the church and society, the LCA commissioned it's Division for Professional Leadership to engage in a study and research how it presented opportunities for and recruited Black persons to serve Christ by becoming professional leaders in the Church. From the initial start of that work there was much discussion about using the term "minority." The Research Team had to tackle this issue because many of the people contacted in the beginning registered strong opposition to using this term. To this very day there is not one hundred percent agreement about using this terminology, however many of the interviewees were more interested in the roles that Black people had played in the life and leadership of the LCA. At the meeting of the steering committee, February 14, 1978, the Project was focused on "telling the story", that is, recounting in a lively, faithful and challenging manner what it has meant to be Black and Lutheran, what it means now and what is a realistic vision of the future. Questions have arisen in and out of the Steering Committee about the nature of "the church" why there is a particular focus on one ethnic minority group.

> The LCA has two sociological studies in which research data used the term "minority' to generally describe all non-white members of the LCA. In "An Inventory of the Lutheran Church in America: Race Relations," 1974, 67 percent of all minority members were Black. Some of the persons contacted during the research phase objected to using the term "minority." For them minority is a sociological term, and not a theological term. It is felt that when the body of Christ refers to its various members, theological terms should be the only terms used to describe that body."

The Rev. Richard Stewart was approached in 1980 by the Division for Professional Leadership of the LCA to spearhead this project, and it became entitled the "Black and Lutheran Project." He relied on the prior work of Dr. Jeff Johnson who authored," Black Christians: The Untold Lutheran Story." A quote from the Editor's Foreword of that text lays out the intent of Johnson's research.

[7] Association of Black Lutherans , Membership Brochure, Year 1981

> "Black Christians: The Untold Lutheran Story" describes the love of God towards Lutherans in the New World. But the record also shows how Lutherans have failed in their responsibility, specifically on the part of whites towards Blacks. The hope is that this volume, which highlights current concerns as it relates to the past, will contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of the Christian faith, that it will clarify and enrich our analysis of issues that beset us, and that in so doing it will enrich our correspondence of the love of Christ."[8]

Dr. Stewart's work, a "Black and Lutheran Project" would be seen as a roadmap to where the Lutheran Church had been along with rationale for grounding of its work going into the 21st century.

As for the Lutheran Church in America, the 1970s and 1980s gave evidence that the Church was actively recruiting people for the ministry. The fine work of Grover Wright was producing results. He continuously traveled throughout the U.S. in search of young Black people to consider the church as a vocation. He is credited with recruiting some of the most prominent Black clergy to the LCA.

Wright was also preoccupied with establishing Chapters of the Association of Black Lutherans. He traveled to synods/congregations throughout New England, Upstate New York, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, the Caribbean, etc. to explain the goals, and the intended scope of the Association. The Chapters were to play a major role in encouraging congregations with Black members to join the effort to work at promoting ministry among Black people with the Lutheran Church. This national effort eventually resulted in the Association holding its Constituting Assembly..

Prior to the establishment of the Association there had been efforts to gather the Black Lutheran Clergy of the LCA, in their respective synods and districts. The Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod was highly active in such activities because significant numbers of Black Clergy were on the rolls there. An effort encouraged collaboration between the Black Clergy from the LCA and the Missouri Synod. This work led to joint services to celebrate the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This work was not easy due to the polity of the Missouri Synod who eventually withdrew from such joint ventures.

[8] Jeff Johnson, "Black Christians: The Untold Lutheran Story, editor's Foreword, P 13

The Association of Black Lutherans flourished during the 1980s and 1990s and has been a highly active organization of the Lutheran Church. During the 1980s, the Organization changed its official name to “African American Lutheran Association. As the Organization was flourishing it began to recognize Black Pastors who were African nationals and began to encourage them to become a part of the Association. This met with some consternation in that many of these pastors felt that the new name did not include them. After serious deliberation and seeking for unity among the Black constituents the Association agreed to change its name to African Descent Lutheran Association (ADLA). This move was welcomed by the Pastors who were African nationals.

ADLA has served as a mouthpiece for Blacks in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America since the denomination’s formation with the merger of its three predecessor church bodies in 1988. ADLA works to promote unity of Black people around the Church, Black awareness and ministry collaboration among congregations and connecting with communities of Black Lutherans. Throughout past decades the Association has held its bi-annual assembly to conduct its business, spiritually enrich the membership and cast vision for Black involvement in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

As ADLA did much to promote Black awareness and its contributions to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, there was also much concern about our Black brothers and sisters across the ocean on the African Continent. Some of the leaders had made the approach for dialogue between Black American Lutherans and Black Lutherans on the African Continent. These efforts established the Conference of International Black Lutherans (CIBL). The Lutheran Church was growing rapidly on the African Continent. It became apparent that many of the African Lutheran Church Bodies had much to share with Blacks in the ELCA. Some of our Black scholars and bureaucrats began conversations to explore collaborations with various church leaders throughout Africa especially in the Southern Region – including Namibia, and South Africa. An initial Conference took place in Harare, Zimbabwe and was supported by the Lutheran World Federation through Secretary Ismael Noko, Division for Global Mission of the ELCA, and the Lutheran Church of Zimbabwe. The attendees also had to contribute toward the costs.

The 1986 Conference in Harare was a milestone in establishing international communication and collaboration with Black people across the ocean. That Conference brought scholars, bishops, theologians, and various church leaders from many African and American Lutheran church bodies and was a memorably giant step toward creating Black Lutheran awareness and cooperation with those of the Southern hemisphere.

CIBL also organized another International Conference in San Leopoldo, Brazil in 2005. This engaging event focused on mission surrounding Black people in the diaspora; especially those in Brazil, the largest community of Black people outside of the African Continent. It was an opportunity for theologians from both sides to engage each other theologically and share experiences of respective communities. Hopefully, CIBL will return to Brazil in 2025 to celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the 2005 Conference. Planning is taking place at the time of this writing.

A particularly important consultation of the Conference of International Black Lutherans was held July 26-27, 1995, in Atlanta, GA. Its goals were to review the Organization's past and present programs. It also defined its relationship to the African American Lutheran Association. At this Consultation were many of the teaching theologians of the ELCA as well as some church leaders. Reports were received from the 1986 Harare Conference, the CPE Project, the Detroit Mentoring Program, CIBL's relationship to the International Teaching & Exchange Program of the ELCA's Division for Global Mission, and CIBL-USA's relationship to the ELCA's Companion Synod Program. To this very day CIBL continues to be an important arm for Black Lutherans in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

SUMMARY

The work of Dr. Jeff Johnson was a major factor surrounding the involvement of Black peoples in the Lutheran Churches in the United States. Almost from its inception the American experience has included Black people. Dr. Johnson has done the research and presents much history surrounding Black presence in American society. It is a story of the Black community's struggle to assimilate into a system of slavery and a Church wondering what to do with Black Lutherans.

The focus of this chapter was to acknowledge the Black experience with a White Lutheran church that itself was seeking to find its own identity in North America. After the abolishment of slavery, the Lutheran Church had to decide what it would do with the Blacks in its midst. The Blacks were Lutheran by faith, but had very little, if any, standing in the Lutheran Church. Were Black people to become "official members" of these white Lutheran

congregations or rather be encouraged to develop their own congregations as part of the Church? Tracing this development from where Dr. Johnson's work concludes is paramount to preserving the legacy of Black involvement in the Lutheran Church in America, ELCA.

The following chapter will examine the crucial role of the Conference of International Black Lutherans – USA in fostering good will among Black people around the world and the promotion of collaboration between Black people in ministry projects.